

## Thriving During the Teenage Years – Adolescent Depression

By Jan Hittelman

Boulder Valley School District – April 2008

Child and adolescent depression can look quite different than adult depression. More specifically, it can look like irritability and oppositional behavior. The challenge, of course, is what teen doesn't appear to be irritable and/or oppositional from time to time? This is why diagnosing depression in youth can be challenging and is often missed completely by parents. A 2002 study at Brown University found that even parents who had good communication with their children were often unaware when their child was depressed.

When we look a bit deeper, we often do see some of the other signs of depression common in adults. These include: feelings of sadness most of the day nearly everyday for a significant period of time, loss of interest in activities that were once pleasurable, changes in sleep or eating patterns, concentration problems, loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness, and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide. In addition, these symptoms often result in significant impairment in daily functioning (in school, at work, at home, socially, etc.). Of course the challenge is that many of these symptoms are normal in the hormonal/developmental roller coaster of adolescence.

Teen depression has become a focus of concern recently because of the alarming increase in teen suicide, which in Colorado is currently the second leading cause of death among young people age 15 to 19.

Shockingly, the fastest growing group for suicide is 10-14 year olds. In the 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted in Boulder Valley, 24% of high school youth reported feeling sad or hopeless, 17% had seriously considered attempting suicide, and 7% had attempted suicide.

There is also a strong connection between substance abuse and depression. It is very common for teens (as well as adults) to self-medicate with drugs and/or alcohol when struggling with depression. At the same time, many teens can develop emotional disorders, like depression, from substance use.

The good news is that depression is a very treatable disorder. Depending on the particular individual, talk therapy, medication, or a combination of the two, has been shown to be highly effective in treating depression. The bad news is that nationally it is estimated that only 30% of adolescents with depression receive treatment.

What's a parent to do? When in doubt, seek the guidance of a trained professional with expertise in diagnosing and treating adolescents. A simple assessment can help determine if there's a problem and if treatment is needed.

For more information on adolescent depression and suicide prevention, parents and youth are encouraged to attend the Monday, April 7<sup>th</sup> HOPE Event: Successfully Navigating Depression from 7:00 to 8:30pm at the Meadows Branch Library in Boulder. This program will be presented by the HOPE Coalition of Boulder County (HopeCoalitionBoulder.org), in partnership with The Camera, BVSD, PEN, Boulder County Healthy Youth Alliance, Boulder Library Foundation, Centennial Peaks Hospital and Boulder Psychological Services. For more information on this free event, please visit BoulderPsychologicalServices.com.

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### Upcoming PEN Event:

**April 10th**

**What Kids Really Want to Ask**

**9am – 11am Recycling Center**

(1901 63<sup>rd</sup> Street, Boulder)

**Presenter:** Margaret Pevec, MA

Life Educator, Coach, Author

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Learn more about PEN by visiting their website at: [www.parentengagementnetwork.com](http://www.parentengagementnetwork.com) or by contacting Betsy Fox with the Boulder County Healthy Youth Alliance at 303-441-3981.

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